

A Memory of Howard

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I just learned that my friend Howard Zinn died today. Earlier this morning, I was being interviewed by the Boston Phoenix, in connection with the release in Boston February of a documentary in which he is featured prominently. The interviewer asked me who my own heroes were, and I had no hesitation in answering, first, "Howard Zinn."

Just weeks ago after watching the film on December 7 I woke up the next morning thinking that I had never told him how much he meant to me. For once in my life, I acted on that thought in a timely way. I sent him an e-mail in which I said, among other things, what I had often told others about him: that he was, "in my opinion, the best human being I've ever known. The best example of what a human can be, and can do with their life."

I'm thinking of many things we did together, from our first meeting in early 1971, when we went with many others from a rally in Faneuil Hall —protesting the "Kidnap Kissinger" indictments of Eqbal Ahmad and Phil Berrigan—to make Citizens' Arrests at the Boston office of the FBI, to the Mayday actions in Washington that spring ("If they won't stop the war, we'll stop the government"). Howard tells that story in the film, of stopping traffic in DC with our affinity group (including Noam Chomsky, Cindy Fredericks, Marilyn Young, Mark Ptashne, Fred Branfman and Mitch Goodman), and I tell it at greater length in my memoir, **Secrets**. But for reasons of space, I had to cut out

the next chapter in which Howard (who had been arrested in DC after most of the rest of us had gone elsewhere) came back to Boston for a rally and a blockade of the Federal Building. I've never published that story, so here it is:

BOSTON FEDERAL BUILDING MAY 1971

[Out-takes from **Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers**: this goes immediately after p. 381, at the end of Chapter 27, "Mayday, 1971"]

A day later, Howard Zinn was the last speaker at a large rally in Boston Common. I was at the back of a huge crowd, listening to him over loudspeakers. 27 years later, I can remember some things he said. "On Mayday in Washington thousands of us were arrested for disturbing the peace. But there is no peace. We were really arrested because we were disturbing the war."

He said, "If Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton had been walking the streets of Georgetown yesterday, they would have been arrested. Arrested for being young."

At the end of his comments he said, "I want to speak now to some of the members of this audience, the plainclothes policemen among us, the military intelligence agents who are

assigned to do surveillance. You are taking the part of secret police, spying on your fellow Americans. You should not be doing what you are doing. You should rethink it, and stop. You do not have to carry out orders that go against the grain of what it means to be an American."

Those last weren't his exact words, but that was the spirit of them. He was to pay for that comment the next day, when we were sitting side by side in a blockade of the Federal Building in Boston. We had a circle of people all the way around the building, shoulder to shoulder, so no one could get in or out except by stepping over us. Behind us were crowds of people with posters who were supporting us but who hadn't chosen to risk arrest. In front of us, keeping us from getting any closer to the main entrance to the building, was a line of policemen, with a large formation of police behind them. All the police had large plastic masks tilted back on their heads and they were carrying long black clubs, about four feet long, like large baseball bats. Later the lawyers told us that city police regulations outlawed the use of batons that long.

But at first the relations with the police were almost friendly. We sat down impudently at the very feet of the policemen who were guarding the entrance, filling in the line that disappeared around the sides until someone came from the rear of the building and announced over a bullhorn, "The blockade is complete. We've surrounded the building!" There was a cheer from the crowd behind us, and more people joined us in sitting until the circle was two or three deep.

We expected them to start arresting us, but for a while the police did nothing. They could have manhandled a passage through the line and kept it open for employees to go in or out, but for some reason they didn't. We thought maybe they really sympathized with our protest, and this was their way of joining in. As the morning wore on, people took apples and crackers and bottles of water out of their pockets and packs and shared them around, and they always offered some to the police standing in front of us. The police always refused, but they seemed to appreciate the offer.

Then one of the officers came over to Howard and said, "You're Professor Zinn, aren't you?" Howard said yes, and the officer reached down and shook his hand enthusiastically. He said, "I heard you lecture at the Police Academy. A lot of us here did. That was a wonderful lecture." Howard had been asked to speak to them about the role of dissent and civil disobedience in American history. Several other policemen came over to pay their respects to Howard and thank him for his lecture. The mood seemed quite a bit different from Washington.

Then a line of employees emerged from the building, wearing coats and ties or dresses. Their arms were raised and they were holding cards in their raised hands. As they circled past us they hold out the cards so we could see what they were: ID cards, showing they were federal employees. They were making the peace-sign with their other hands, they were circling around the building to show solidarity with what we were doing. Their spokesman said over a bullhorn, "We want this war to be over, too! Thank you for what you are doing! Keep it up." Photographers, including police, were scrambling to take pictures

of them, and some of them held up their ID cards so they would get in the picture. It was the high point of the day.

A little while after the employees had gone back inside the building, there was a sudden shift in the mood of the police. An order had been passed. The bloc of police in the center of the square got into tight formation and lowered their plastic helmets. The police standing right in front of us, over us, straightened up, adjusted their uniforms and lowered their masks. Apparently the time had come to start arrests. The supporters who didn't want to be arrested fell back.

But there was no arrest warning. There was a whistle, and the line of police began inching forward, black batons raised upright. They were going to walk through us or over us, push us back. The man in front of us, who had been talking to Howard about his lecture a little earlier, muttered to us under his breath, "Leave! Now! Quick, get up." He was warning, not menacing us.

Howard and I looked at each other. We'd come expecting to get arrested. It didn't seem right to just get up and move because someone told us to, without arresting us. We stayed where we were. No one else left either. Boots were touching our shoes. The voice over our heads whispered intensely, "Move! Please. For God's sake, move!" Knees in uniform pressed our knees. I saw a club coming down. I put my hands over my head, fists clenched, and a four-foot baton hit my wrist, hard. Another one hit my shoulder.

I rolled over, keeping my arms over my head, got up and moved back a few yards. Howard was being hauled off by several policemen. One had Howard's arms pinned behind him, another had jerked his head back by the hair. Someone had ripped his shirt in two, there was blood on his bare chest. A moment before he had been sitting next to me and I waited for someone to do the same to me, but no one did. I didn't see anyone else getting arrested. But no one was sitting anymore, the line had been broken, disintegrated. Those who had been sitting hadn't moved very far, they were standing like me a few yards back, looking around, holding themselves where they'd been clubbed. The police had stopped moving. They stood in a line, helmets still down, slapping their batons against their hands. Their adrenaline was still up, but they were standing in place.

cut
Blood was running down my hand, covering the back of my hand. I was wearing a Rolex and it had taken the force of the blow. The baton had smashed the crystal and driven pieces of glass into my wrist. Blood was dripping off my fingers. Someone gave me a handkerchief to wrap around my wrist and told me to raise my arm. The handkerchief got soaked quickly and blood was running down my arm while I looked for a first-aid station that was supposed to be at the back of the crowd, in a corner of the square. I finally found it and someone picked the glass out of my arm and put a thick bandage around it. I'd moved my watch to the other arm. It was still running, keeping time, without a crystal. That was impressive.¹²

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ad
An ad campaign for Rolex watches had been appearing for a while featuring pictures and stories of Rolexes that had been through severe challenges and kept running. Watches that were keeping perfect time on being removed from the bellies of sharks, and so forth. I thought I had the makings of a good ad here--"This Rolex was struck by a Boston policeman

I went back to the protest. My shoulder was aching. The police were standing where they had stopped, and the blockade had reformed, people were sitting ten yards back from where they had been before. There seemed to be more people sitting, not fewer. Many of the supporters had joined in. But it was quiet. No one was speaking loudly, no laughing. People were waiting for the police to move forward again. They weren't expecting any longer to get arrested.

Only three or four people had been picked out of the line to be arrested before. The police had made a decision (it turned out) to arrest only the "leaders," not to give us the publicity of arrests and trials. Howard hadn't been an organizer of this action, he was just participating like the rest of us, but from the way they treated him when they pulled him out of the line, his comments directly to the police in the rally the day before must have rubbed someone the wrong way.³

with a four-foot baton, and kept on running." But I never got around to notifying the company after I'd replaced the crystal.

³. Presumably it wasn't one of the officers who had been coming over that morning to be friendly to him. On the other hand, I'd seen compartmentation of feelings at work, I'd felt it on my shoulder and wrist, One of the clubs that hit me had to have been swung by the man who, a second before, had been whispering at us, warning us. He was begging us not to make him do this to us. But he didn't pull his punch a moment later. And he might not have been just obeying orders at that point. We hadn't made it easy for him, we had left him, he probably felt, no choice despite his plea. He might have felt fury. In any case, he did his job. And if it wasn't his club I felt, it was that of a man next to him. They'd all been friendly with us minutes and hours before, tacitly fraternizing, until they got the order to carry out a maneuver they must have practiced, clubbing us in lieu of arrest. Straightening their uniforms and their backs, lowering their helmets, amazingly quickly put them, as we would say in California, in a different space.

A dozen years later, I saw an instant's transformation on command like that, from friendly (tail-wagging) to maniacal, in a German shepherd police dog on the end of a chain

I found Roz Zinn, Howard's wife, sitting in the line on the side at right angles to where Howard and I had been before. I sat down between her and their housemate, a woman her age. They had been in support before until they had seen what happened to Howard.

Looking at the police in formation, with their uniforms and clubs, guns on their hips, I felt naked. I knew that it was an illusion in combat to think you were protected because you were carrying a weapon, but it was an illusion that worked. For the first time, I was very conscious of being unarmed. At last, in my own country, I understood what a Vietnamese villager must have felt at what the Marines called a "county fair," when the Marines rounded up everyone they could find in a hamlet--all women and children and old people, never draft- or VC-age young men--to be questioned one at a time in a tent, meanwhile passing out candy to the kids and giving vaccinations. Winning hearts and minds, trying to recruit informers. No one among the villagers knowing what the soldiers, in their combat gear, would do next, or which of them might be detained.

We sat and talked and waited for the police to come again. They lowered their helmets and formed up. The two women I was with were both older than I was. I moved my body in front of them, to take the first blows. I felt a hand on my elbow. "Excuse me, I was sitting there," the woman who shared the Zinn's house said to me, with a cold look. She

leash, jaws slaving inches from my face. That was at a Pershing missile base at Bitburg, Germany. I mentioned to reporters afterward, on coming out of jail, that the police dogs that day had not put the best face on the New Germany. But I had learned by that time from Stanley Milgram's work (*Obedience to Authority*) and at the Boston Federal Building that you didn't have to be a dog, or German, to act like that.

hadn't come there that day and sat down, she told me later, to be protected by me. I apologized and scrambled back, behind them.

No one moved. The police didn't move, either. They stood in formation facing us, plastic masks over their faces, for quite a while. But they didn't come forward again.

They had kept open a passage in front for the employees inside to leave after five, and eventually the police left, and we left.